

News Sun, November 5, 2004

A young Mundelein soldier in Baghdad reached out to the Mundelein Police Department asking them to help the Iraqi police he is training. On Wednesday Mundelein reached back.

"You'll make an impact on the IPs (Iraq Police) here psychologically. These guys are basically operating in the wild west supported only by U.S. forces," wrote former Mundelein High School student Erik Archer, now a captain with the 127th Military Police Company based out of Germany.

"The IPs are hardworking, honest, determined heros who face the dangers of death daily in order to help build a better Iraq," Archer wrote to Mundelein Police Chief Raymond Rose.

He was asking for pencils, papers, maybe a computer. Instead Rose sent 39 old protective vests the department had left over after they issued new Kevlar vests to the Mundelein officers. The cost of the vests start at \$500 when new.

"This will enable them to save lives and bring stability," said Archer's mother, Ann Harmon of Mundelein. Rose said it was just the beginning of their help.

"Our intent is to start with this and then continue that relationship and send them more things they need, like pens, paper, just basic items," said Rose.

"If they don't have the tools to do the job they can't do the job," he said.

Archer wrote to Rose and some other county police departments to see if they would be interested in setting up sister city-type relationships with Baghdad police stations and send them some basic supplies.

Mundelein is the first and only station to respond so far.

"We are really proud of Mundelein. This is awesome," said Harmon.

She said some of the company's interpreters will also get protective vests. Her son's last interpreter was a former major in Saddam's army and he was assassinated last week.

"This is huge. It will change lives and it will save lives," she said.

She said her son told her of a story where there was an accident and one of the men driving one of the vehicles in the accident got out and started yelling.

"The interpreter told the MPs that the man kept repeating the word for bomb. It turned out he was driving a car bomb," she said.

"Without the interpreters it would be very hard to get anything done," she said.

The cost of sending the vests was covered by James O'Rourke, the military affairs coordinator for the state treasurer's office. He also runs Chicago's Senn High School Army JROTC program and is a member of the American Legion 5th District. Both organizations raised the money.

"I told them we got the money, you get the vests," O'Rourke said at the Mundelein Police Station where he picked up the vests. "It will cost about \$200 to send them," he said.

Rose said it took a few months to get proper clearance to send the vests because it is something that if the enemy intercepted they could use them to their advantage.

He had to deal with the Department of Defense and he enlisted the help of Congressman Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park, in dealing with Washington, D.C.

"We had to make sure all this equipment was going to the right place," Rose said. He added that if the community wants to help they can also drop off supplies at the police station.

"This is a great opportunity for the community to show support," he said.

Archer has sent pictures to his mother showing some of what is going on in Iraq. One of the police stations they are working with is next to a bombed out library.

"Squatters moved in and they consist of a 2-year-old, 4-year-old, 6-year-old and a 15-year-old girl who is in charge of them," Harmon said. There is a picture of the kids playing in a courtyard.

"They created their own playground using the bottom of an old office chair and a ladder and the older girl spins them around. That's their playground," said Harmon.

O'Rourke has started Operation Crayon to send school supplies through Harmon's son. O'Rourke lives in Riverside and he is getting help from the Hauser Junior High School there with that effort.

Harmon also works with the Libertyville-based Support Our Troops. They are collecting everything from toiletries to nerf balls and frisbees to send to the troops.

The Libertyville Sports Complex has given them a room to store the materials and they are planning to box a shipment Tuesday from 7 to 9 p.m., said Cathy Burton, a founder of the group whose son is home now.

They have collection boxes at the Libertyville Village Hall and post office, Centre Club, the sports complex and both high schools. Donations to cover postage can be sent to P.O. Box 6782, Libertyville, 60048.

They are planning a candle light vigil at the sports complex for Dec. 4 and a spring 5k run.

"It's been heartwarming and wonderful. It's exceeded my wildest dreams," said Burton.

Harmon said these community efforts give the troops a lift.

"It makes Erik feel people do care and they aren't forgotten," she said.